

Parental Involvement of Children with Special Needs: Insights from Epstein's Six Domains Framework

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Abstract: Parental Involvement of Children with Special Needs: Insights from Epstein's Six Domains Framework. Objectives: This study investigated the role of parents of children with disabilities in inclusive school settings. **Methods:** Employing a qualitative approach, data were collected through focus group discussions (FGD) to 17 parents for children with special needs and analyzed using ATLAS.ti software, following an interactive analysis model comprising data condensation, data presentation, and conclusion drawing/verification. **Findings:** Findings highlight the critical role parents play across six domains of involvement, as defined by Epstein's framework: creating supportive home environments (Parenting), engaging in clear communication with the school (Communicating), volunteering at the school (Volunteering), supporting learning at home (Learning at Home), participating in school-related decision-making (Decision-Making), and collaborating with the community to coordinate resources (Collaborating with the Community). These areas of involvement enable parents to actively contribute to inclusion in educational settings. **Conclusion:** This study underscores the importance of comprehensive parental engagement of children with disabilities within inclusive schools.

Keywords: role of parents, disabilities, inclusive schools.

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■ INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education provides opportunities for children with special needs to be able to attend public schools and study together with normal children without being separated yet requires some basic things for them to be served in public schools. Inclusive education as an educational service system requires that all children with disabilities are served in nearby schools, in regular classes together with their peers (Hornby, 2014). Children with special needs are children who are in the process of growing and developing significantly (physical, mental-intellectual, social, and emotional) compared to other children their age (Hallahan et al., 2014).

Existing research has consistently demonstrated the efficacy and benefits of inclusive education for students with special needs (Cologon, 2014; Cologon et al., 2019). This growing body of evidence has influenced recent policymaking in the education sector. In 2023, the Indonesian government issued Permendikbudristek Number 48, which mandates that all formal schools must accommodate and facilitate the needs of students with disabilities. This significant policy directive implies that schools are now legally obligated to provide appropriate educational services and learning supports for all students, including those with special needs. As inclusive schooling becomes more widely adopted, it is crucial to assess the quality and

effectiveness of the services and supports being provided to this student population. Rigorous evaluation of inclusive education implementation is necessary to ensure these programs are truly meeting the diverse learning and developmental needs of children and youth with special needs.

Overall, the research findings and the new policy landscape indicate a growing commitment to inclusive education in Indonesia. However, continued monitoring and optimization of inclusive practices will be essential to promoting positive outcomes and full social integration for students with disabilities within mainstream school environments.

Existing research highlights several key factors that support the implementation of inclusive education. Among these are student characteristics, the presence of accompanying teachers, teacher awareness and knowledge about inclusive practices, and importantly, parental involvement (Engevik et al., 2018). This indicates that parents play a crucial supporting role in the success of inclusive education initiatives. Many studies have revealed that parents have the most significant influence on a child's educational outcomes (Mutodi & Ngirande, 2014). Researchers consistently find that strong family support is the most influential factor determining student performance. Several studies have specifically examined parental attitudes towards their children's school success. The empirical evidence demonstrates a positive relationship between parental involvement in education and academic achievement (Tárraga García et al., 2018), as well as increased child self-esteem, academic performance (Garbacz et al., 2017), and improved retention and attendance at school (Ross, 2016). Taken together, these findings underscore the critical importance of parental engagement and support in fostering the success of inclusive education programs. Meaningful partnerships between schools and families are essential to ensuring positive outcomes for students with special needs.

The problem arise when several studies in Indonesia have found low parental involvement in children's education. Rani, et al., (2018) found that many parents still do not understand their children well, and do not know what they can do to optimize their children's development (Rani et al., 2018) The results of a study conducted in Yogyakarta found that parental involvement is still low in children's education. For example, research conducted by Wardani and Ayriza (2021) found that parents do not have enough time to accompany their children to study because they have to work and parents are impatient in accompanying their children while studying at home (A. Wardani & Ayriza, 2020). In fact, parental involvement is an important factor in children's success in school. The involvement of parents of students with special needs seems to be an important thing to study considering the findings of previous studies.

Children with special needs (CSN) who have been labeled in society as special children who must always receive assistance in daily activities, are required to play a role in everyday life, both in the school environment and in the community environment. In everyday life, every individual cannot be separated from the life of the environment, namely family, school and community. The family is the first environment in an individual's life, where individuals learn to express themselves. Family parenting patterns such as parental attitudes, family habits, and family views will affect the formation of children's independence (Caño et al., 2016). The family environment where individuals learn to pay attention to others then imitate, participate in activities and finally learn to work together, then individuals will learn life skills.

Surakarta City as an inclusive city, is committed that every school can accept students with special needs. In the Regional Regulation of Surakarta City Number 9 of 2020 concerning the Protection and Fulfillment of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, it is stated that the

Regional Government organizes and/or facilitates education for Persons with Disabilities in every path, type, and level of education according to its authority. Seeing the strong commitment of the city of Surakarta and the importance of the role of parents in the success of inclusive education, this study aimed to investigate the role of parents of children with disabilities in inclusive school settings. This article is expected to provide valuable insights for policy makers, academics, and education practitioners in their efforts to create a more inclusive and equitable educational environment for students with special needs.

■ METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach, a comprehensive method for examining social phenomena within their natural contexts, allowing for a deep, contextualized understanding of participant experiences. Qualitative research prioritizes the authenticity of real-life settings over controlled environments, making it particularly suitable for exploring the role of parents in supporting children with disabilities in inclusive schools (Creswell & Creswell, 2021; Miles et al., 2014).

The focus of this study was to analyze parental involvement across six areas of Epstein's theory within inclusive educational settings (Epstein, 2011). To gather relevant data, a forum group discussion (FGD) was conducted with 17 parents, all of whom have children with disabilities attending inclusive schools. FGDs provide a dynamic platform for participants to share experiences, challenges, and insights, encouraging interactive dialogue that enriches the data with diverse perspectives (Creswell & Creswell, 2021; Miles et al., 2014). The researcher served as the primary instrument, actively engaging with participants while guiding the discussions according to a set of prepared questions. These questions, designed based on Epstein's framework, covered topics broadly related to

parental barriers and needs in the context of inclusive education.

Although the researcher was the central instrument in facilitating the FGDs, structured instruments were also used as a reference to maintain consistency across sessions. The discussion guide, developed collaboratively by the research team, provided a focused framework for eliciting in-depth insights into the multifaceted roles and challenges parents face in supporting their children's autonomy.

Data analysis was carried out following Miles and Huberman's interactive analysis model, which includes three sequential components: data condensation, data presentation, and drawing conclusions/verification. In the data condensation phase, transcripts from the FGDs were reviewed and coded to identify recurring themes and patterns related to parental roles. These condensed data were organized and imported into ATLAS.ti (version 9), a qualitative data analysis software that facilitated coding, categorization, and comprehensive data organization. ATLAS.ti enabled the systematic processing of large volumes of qualitative data, supporting detailed exploration of thematic connections and the development of conceptual frameworks.

For the presentation of findings, data were displayed both narratively and visually. Visualizations included network diagrams, which illustrated the relationships between different categories and subthemes. These visual aids were instrumental in clarifying complex patterns and enhancing the interpretability of the findings, allowing for clearer, data-driven conclusions.

This study employed a qualitative research design, which is well-suited for exploring social phenomena in natural contexts (Creswell & Creswell, 2021; Miles et al., 2014). The design facilitated an in-depth and contextualized understanding of parental roles in supporting children with disabilities in inclusive schools.

Following established qualitative research practices, the study progressed through several systematic steps. First, the research team collaboratively developed a discussion guide based on Epstein's six areas of parental involvement (Epstein, 2011). This guide served as a structured framework for data collection. Subsequently, data were gathered through focus group discussions (FGDs) involving parents of children with disabilities. Finally, the collected data were analyzed using an interactive analysis model, and the findings were presented both narratively and visually. The research was conducted over several months to allow sufficient time for data collection, analysis, and reporting.

The participants of this study were 17 parents of children with disabilities attending inclusive schools. These participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure they had direct experience with the research topic. This approach allowed the study to capture diverse perspectives and insights into the challenges and roles of parents in the inclusive education context.

The instruments used in the study included the researcher as the primary instrument, a structured discussion guide, and qualitative analysis software. The researcher facilitated and guided the FGDs while maintaining interactive discussions. The discussion guide was developed based on Epstein's theoretical framework to elicit detailed insights about parental roles and challenges. To ensure content validity, the guide was collaboratively reviewed by experts in the field. Reliability was achieved through consistent application of the guide across all FGDs. The study also utilized ATLAS.ti (version 9), a software tool designed for organizing and analyzing qualitative data systematically.

Data were analyzed using Miles and Huberman's interactive analysis model, which consists of three main components: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification (Miles et al., 2014). In the

data condensation phase, the FGD transcripts were reviewed and coded to identify recurring themes and patterns. These condensed data were categorized and organized in ATLAS.ti to facilitate a systematic analysis. The data display stage involved presenting findings both narratively and through visualizations such as network diagrams. These diagrams highlighted relationships between categories and subthemes, making the findings easier to interpret. The final stage involved drawing conclusions based on the patterns and insights identified during the analysis.

■ RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This study's findings highlight the multifaceted roles parents of children with disabilities play in inclusive schools. The framework provided by Epstein's theory (Epstein, 1995) serves as a foundation for analyzing parental involvement across six distinct but interconnected areas: parenting, communication with schools, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and community collaboration. Each area of involvement demonstrates how parents can provide targeted support that promotes students' engagement in inclusive educational settings. Based on the research conducted, parents demonstrate their roles in several aspects, as illustrated in the following figure:

Parenting

A primary role of parents in supporting their children's education is in establishing a home environment conducive to learning and personal development. For children with disabilities, such an environment is essential to both academic progress and emotional well-being (Heward et al., 2017; Hornby, 2014; Kauffman & Hornby, 2020). Parents in this study described providing dedicated study spaces, minimizing distractions, and ensuring a structured daily routine that facilitates focus and engagement with academic

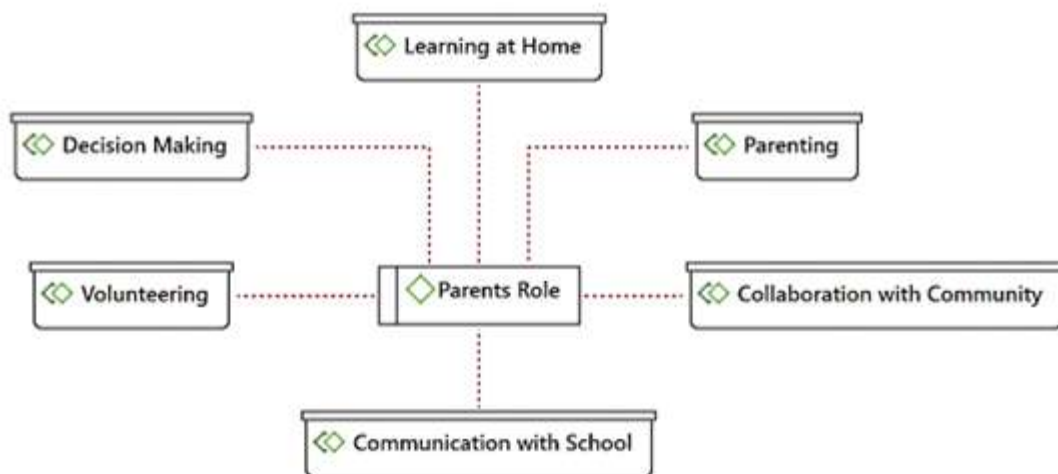


Figure 1. Network coding results on parental roles using the ATLAS.ti application

tasks. Research suggests that when parents create organized and supportive home environments, children experience increased motivation and a stronger sense of self-efficacy (Heward et al., 2017; Kauffman & Hornby, 2020).

As one parents explained *“So my child, um, only plays with their phone on Saturdays and Sundays. That’s a rule we have at home. Because, you know, once they start using the phone and playing games, their emotions get all over the place, up and down.”*

Another parent also revealed *“I make sure to take care of that. So, whatever they need for school, I make sure to buy it. That’s how it is. I feel bad if I don’t get them what they need.”*

Parents often play an essential role in regulating their children’s use of technology by limiting screen time and setting boundaries for video games. Research indicates that setting such boundaries can reduce distractions, enabling children to focus on their academic responsibilities (Đurišić & Bunijevac, 2017; Lara & Saracostti, 2019; Ramadani et al., 2016; Ristiani, 2015).

Beyond structural arrangements, parents also provide emotional support by offering counseling and ensuring that their children have access to necessary therapeutic services. Several

parents in this study mentioned consulting with professionals to support their children’s specific needs, such as speech therapy, occupational therapy, and emotional counseling. This is consistent with previous findings that emphasize the critical role of therapeutic support in fostering children’s resilience and adaptability (Fitri & Iswari, 2022; Kahveci, 2016). Parental commitment to providing both physical and emotional support at home helps children develop essential coping mechanisms, reinforcing their ability to navigate academic and social challenges independently (Hornby, 2011; Lara & Saracostti, 2019; Rani et al., 2018).

As highlighted by one parent, *“Yes, I took my child to Indrayati Hospital for child development. There, they recommended therapy, like speech therapy, walking therapy, occupational therapy, things like that. We used to go to Indrayati Hospital and YPAC for therapy. Yes, the one in front of Grand Mall. We’re still going to YPAC now.”*

Communicating with Schools

Effective communication between parents and schools is fundamental to the success of inclusive education. In this study, parents reported regular communication with teachers and school staff, which included discussions about their

children's academic progress, behavioral challenges, and the need for specific accommodations. Through these communication, parents are able to advocate for their children's needs, ensuring that the school environment aligns with their child's personal learning requirements.

As some parents explained, *"Then I talked to Mrs. Winda, who is specialize in handling inclusive children. I shared a lot with her about this and that."*

"I keep in regular communication with the special education teacher (GPK). I often ask for assignments so that what we do at home connects with what's being taught at school."

Another parent also revealed, *"The teacher said, 'There's been a lot of progress, Ma'am.' Once they were handled by the PLDPI, there was significant improvement."*

Parents predominantly opted for face-to-face communication with teachers when addressing sensitive issues related to their children, such as bullying. However, for more routine matters, particularly those pertaining to academic progress, parents preferred online communication platforms, such as WhatsApp. This method of communication was perceived as effective in keeping parents informed about their children's academic performance and progress. As a result, parents reported that this approach helped ensure their children were better able to keep up with the subject matter covered in the classroom.

As one parent revealed *"Being bullied at school, like having their hair pulled, and then... every time they came home from school, there were always scribbles, pen marks, on their clothes too. So I reported it to the teacher (directly)"*

Another parents also said *"Yes, it was helpful. Sometimes they even text me on WhatsApp, asking for my phone number. Then*

they'd say, 'Ma'am, at home your child needs to do this, please pay attention to that.'"

Additionally, some parents took on a more active role by facilitating discussions among other parents, sharing experiences, and building a network of mutual support. This aligns with findings by Rani et al., (2015), who note that parent-led communication efforts foster community solidarity and shared understanding (Rani et al., 2018). When parents are involved in open and consistent communication with schools, they become not only advocates for their own children but also for broader inclusive practices, which promotes a culture of inclusion and mutual support within the school (Lilawati, 2020; Rani et al., 2018; Sanjaya, 2019).

Volunteering at Schools

Parental volunteering in schools is a powerful form of involvement that strengthens connections between home and school while also providing essential support within the classroom. The findings of this study reveal that some parents actively participated as volunteers in training and workshop activities organized by the school. These findings align with Epstein's perspective, which emphasizes that parents can engage as volunteers in various school activities, including attending seminars, workshops, and other training programs (Epstein, 2011)

According to one parent's account, *"Yes, I have. There was this event, Sir, what do you call it, an invitation. It was about how to educate children, their study habits, understanding children, their behavior. Things like whether we need to do this or that at home. That sort of thing."*

Another parent also revealed, *"Yes, just recently, I was invited to a parenting session for motivation. They shared examples of parents who had successfully raised their children."*

And there was another time, Sir. Not all parents were invited at once. Well, actually, all parents were invited, but it was done in turns, right? They talked about children's behavior, explaining things like, 'this is how it should be,' and so on. They discussed behavior or habits at home, at school, or how children play, and so on. It was explained in detail."

The presence of parents also fosters an inclusive environment where children with disabilities feel supported by both family and school staff. Research by Karin (2018) and Magunsong-Wahyuni (2018) suggests that volunteering enhances students' sense of belonging, creating a school culture where diversity and support are actively practiced (Karin, 2018; Mangunsong & Wahyuni, 2018). This model of shared responsibility benefits all students and reinforces a sense of community within the inclusive classroom (Caño et al., 2016; Epstein, 2011). Moreover, parental participation in school activities strengthens the bond between parents, children, and the school, fostering a collaborative relationship that supports students' holistic development and reinforces the alignment between home and school environments.

While parental volunteering is highly valuable, it presents certain challenges. One notable obstacle is that some parents struggle to attend school events due to demanding schedules or limited availability.

As one parent explained during the interview, *"There was another invitation, but I couldn't attend because I didn't have the time."*

Time constraints are among the most prevalent issues, particularly for families where both parents are employed (Kaye et al., 2021; Widyastono et al., 2024). To mitigate this, schools should carefully plan and schedule events at times that accommodate the varying circumstances of

families, ensuring broader participation and engagement (Hornby, 2011, 2014).

Learning at Home

Learning at home represents one of the most direct forms of parental involvement, where parents support their children's academic efforts outside of school hours. For children with disabilities, home learning requires a structured approach to ensure that learning activities are both accessible and engaging. Parents in this study discussed various strategies, such as helping with homework, engaging their children in reading exercises, and encouraging consistent study routines. Other strategies identified in this study included providing more frequent breaks, using concrete materials, and incorporating visual aids, particularly for children with autism. These approaches align with findings from previous research, which suggests that such strategies are effective for children with special needs (Hallahan et al., 2014; Heward et al., 2017). These practices reinforce skills learned at school and help children develop study habits and self-discipline, which are essential for academic success (Lilawati, 2020; Tejaningrum, 2017; K. Wardani & Dwiningrum, 2021).

As one parents explained, *"But whenever there's free time, I ask them to write. They can do it, but I have to give them breaks in between."*

Another parent also revealed, *"Yes, like ABC. For vowels, I use a different color marker than for consonants. That way, they can arrange things on their own using bottle caps."*

One parent described their approach as follows, *"For example, when it's time to go to school, I tell them, 'You're going to school, so no running around, and you need to sit down. And when you're with your friends, don't tease them or hit them.' You see, my child is a visual*

learner, Sir. So when I teach, I have to use visuals, I have to show them pictures. If I only explain verbally, it doesn't stick. I have to show them, like, 'Look, this is what it means not to hit. Hitting looks like this.' Without visuals, it's hard—just talking alone doesn't work well."

Parents collaborate with teachers to ensure consistency in supporting their children's learning at home by maintaining regular communication. This collaboration occurs through both online and offline channels as explained above. This finding is consistent with previous studies, which have emphasized the importance of ongoing communication between parents and teachers to enhance the effectiveness of home-based learning support (Dor, 2019; Kaye et al., 2021). By establishing a balanced routine, parents create an environment that supports both academic growth and life skills development. This not only strengthens children's academic performance but also cultivates social skills, as children learn to manage their time and prioritize their tasks

Decision Making

Involvement in decision-making processes is a critical area of parental engagement that empowers families to shape their children's educational experiences directly. In this study, many parents took active roles in decisions related to their children's individualized education programs (IEPs) and therapy needs. Parental involvement in decision-making ensures that educational and therapeutic strategies are tailored to each child's specific needs, facilitating a more effective learning environment. According to Hornby (2011), when parents are engaged in decision-making, schools are better able to design programs that reflect the unique requirements of each student, thereby enhancing educational outcomes (Hornby, 2011).

A parent emphasized, *"There's always at least twice a year. For the ones we organize ourselves, it's usually every semester. At the*

start of the semester, for example, there's usually a coordination meeting between the teachers and parents."

Parents from private schools were also relatively involved in their children's learning programs, as reflected in one parent's statement during a discussion about their child's strengths: *"I wanted to focus on his strengths. The school psychologist said the assessment was through drawing. But I was a little unsure about it. Then I thought, should I be doing this for him, since his motivation was to develop his talent..."*

While parental involvement in decision-making was important, parents from formal or government schools were often not included by the school. This finding was intriguing and warranted further investigation to explore the differences in parental involvement in decision-making between government and private schools.

Moreover, participating in decision-making processes allows parents to advocate for services and accommodations that support their children's need and well-being. Studies have shown that parental advocacy often leads to improved resources, such as access to specialized staff and therapeutic programs (Epstein, 2011; Fantuzzo et al., 2014; Mackichan & Harkins, 2013). For instance, parental advocacy often ensures that students with special needs gain access to necessary educational resources, such as individualized education plans (IEPs), accommodations, and support services. By advocating for inclusion in general education settings and challenging discriminatory practices, parents can secure appropriate educational opportunities and help their children overcome barriers to learning. By participating in these discussions, parents become partners in the education process, ensuring that decisions align with their children's long-term goals and aspirations. This collaborative approach ultimately benefits students, as it creates a personalized educational experience that

accommodates their individual strengths and challenges.

Collaboration with the Community

Collaboration with community resources provides parents and their children with access to a broader support network. Many parents in this study described working with local organizations to access additional services, such as tutoring, therapeutic support, or extracurricular activities tailored to children with disabilities. Collaborating with community organizations allows children to receive support tailored to their specific needs, such as an appropriate learning environment and suitable learning materials.

As one parents explained *“Eventually, they were directed to tutoring at Mrs. Ambar’s place, which is specifically for children with dyslexia. The tutoring there uses something like Montessori materials, you know, special teaching tools for kids like that.”*

By providing an approach to learning that is customized to the child’s needs, children with special needs receive the support essential for their development. This finding aligns with previous studies that emphasize the benefits of using tailored learning approaches to support students with special needs.

Parents can get involved in community initiatives by collaborating with local organizations that offer services tailored to children with disabilities, such as tutoring, therapy, and extracurricular activities. This collaboration helps provide personalized support for children’s development. Parents can also participate in parenting sessions, Zoom meetings, and forums, which allow them to connect with other families and share resources. By engaging in these activities, parents help create a supportive network that reinforces inclusive education and provides children with diverse opportunities for growth and socialization.

These community partnerships extend the resources available to families, creating a support

system that goes beyond the school environment. Epstein (2011) suggest that community involvement not only strengthens families but also contributes to a more inclusive educational experience by promoting access to a wide range of resources (Epstein, 2011).

One participant shared, *“Yes, that’s right. I also often join parenting sessions and Zoom meetings for children with dyslexia, both with that organization and others outside of it. What was the name again... Bhineka something, I can’t quite remember. They often hold Zoom sessions specifically for children.”*

Another parent also revealed, *“At Lazuardi, they have something as well. There’s a forum for parents called Pelangi. It’s for children with special needs. They hold regular meetings, and they often include parenting sessions too. At Lazuardi, there’s definitely something like that for parents. Yes, it’s held regularly.”*

By actively engaging with community organizations, parents help create a network of support that reinforces inclusive practices and ensures that children with disabilities receive the comprehensive assistance they need. Some parents reported organizing or participating in community events, which enabled them to connect with other families and share valuable resources. This form of collaboration enhances children’s performance by providing diverse opportunities for socialization, skill-building, and personal growth. Community engagement supports children in becoming active, capable members of society, highlighting the importance of a holistic approach to inclusive education (Fantuzzo et al., 2014; Lo & Xu, 2019; Sheridan & Kim, 2015).

■ CONCLUSION

The results of this study emphasize the significant role that parents play in fostering performances among children with disabilities within inclusive school settings. This study

underscores the need for schools to foster strong partnerships with families and community organizations, as these connections are essential to inclusive education. Understanding and supporting the diverse roles that parents play can help schools create a more inclusive environment, where children with disabilities are supported in reaching their full potential.

The practical implications of this research underscore the need for schools, particularly public schools, to enhance parental involvement in the decision-making process, especially in the context of inclusive education. Policymakers should establish and implement comprehensive policies that encourage schools to actively involve parents in shaping educational practices and decisions. Such policies would ensure that parents play a more significant role in the educational trajectory of their children, ultimately supporting the development of children with disabilities and enabling them to reach their full potential.

A key direction for future research is to investigate the differences in parental involvement between public and private schools and to examine how these differences may influence the developmental outcomes of children with disabilities. Understanding these distinctions can offer valuable insights into the effectiveness of parental involvement in different educational settings. Further studies should focus on identifying best practices and strategies that can be implemented to increase parental engagement and ensure that children with disabilities receive the support they need in both public and private educational contexts.

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